

## Poor places, powerful people? Co-producing cultural counter-representations of place

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## Research Article

# ABSTRACT

This paper considers the ethical aspects of co-producing visual representations of communities experiencing economic deprivation. It focuses on one of five case studies that are part of a UK-wide research project that is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The research broadly aims to explore how arts-based approaches can enable communities to express health and wellbeing issues to policy makers and service providers. The case-studies are grounded in a community based participatory research epistemology whereby researchers work with participants and other stakeholders to co-produce data and artistic work. This paper focuses on arts-based research we conducted in the case study area of 'Garthcoed', a post-mining locality within the borough of Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales. Communities in Garthcoed have been subjected to stigmatising representations of poverty that have dominated British mass media in recent years. Through participatory creative methods, we aimed to facilitate the co-production of cultural counter-representations from the perspective of residents, in order to challenge the prevailing media representations and to better understand health and wellbeing. In doing this, we encountered several inter-related ethical challenges. This paper presents data from the Garthcoed case study to illustrate the complexity of working co-productively with visual methods to achieve these aims. In particular we explore the ethics of conducting research in stigmatised communities using participatory creative methods with a particular focus on questions of representation, authorship and audience.

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## Introduction

This paper considers ethical issues that emerged in a project that involved co-producing visual representations of communities experiencing economic deprivation and place-based stigma. It focuses on one of five case studies within a UK-wide research study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The study, called *Representing Communities: developing the power of people to improve health and wellbeing*<sup>1</sup>, explores how the arts and humanities can harness the creative power of local people in defining, shaping and representing health and wellbeing to policy makers. The research involved a number of stages, including (i) a review of current cultural and policy representations of each case study and elicitation of community responses to these; (ii) collection of data through a range of methods; (iii) creation of new representations co-produced by local residents, artists and researchers; and (iv) knowledge exchange. Throughout the data collection and creation of new representations, we maintained an iterative relationship with our university research ethics committee as the process unfolded. In this paper we consider the ethics of researching stigma using participatory creative methods with a particular focus on questions of representation, authorship and audience. We discuss these issues with reference to the methods used with community residents that have facilitated the co-production of cultural counter-representations of place, focusing on one of the case studies.

The case study explored here is of a locality, which we call 'Garthcoed', on the edges of a former mining town called Merthyr Tydfil in south Wales (hereafter referred to as Merthyr). Once at the centre of the world's iron and steel production and coal mining industries, Merthyr's fortunes declined along with the closure of the iron works, coal mines and later manufacturing industries, leaving a legacy of high unemployment, poverty and poor health. As with individuals, places have histories in which the wear and tear of disadvantage accumulates (Elliott, Harrop & Williams, 2010). The long shadow of previous economic blows is evident in the lack, and poor quality, of public amenities and on the financial, social, emotional and physical pressures that residents face. As in many other neo-liberal economies, in the UK there has been a focus on moving people away from welfare dependency and into employment, although few jobs are available. At the same time people who are deemed 'useless' to economic recovery are demonised and degraded, both through institutionalised mechanisms such as sanctions but also through symbolic construction of meanings attached to places that serve to reinforce and legitimise inequalities. This legitimisation makes it difficult to resist or challenge place-based stigma, which is reinforced through the dismantling of solidaristic institutions and organisations associated with working class life. In the absence of collective forms of expression and action, the experience of poverty and exclusion is individualised and despair becomes privatised (Chakraborty, 2015; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). This raises important challenges for researchers who see their role as pointing to the structural issues that reinforce stigma, rather than the personal 'troubles' these circumstances are generating.

Garthcoed is an administrative construction to focus resources on one of the most

economically deprived areas in Wales. The Communities First programme is a central component of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty initiative. Resources and interventions are focused on areas that are geographically clustered with the intention that people living in the most deprived areas should benefit most from its core policies. However, as a Communities First cluster, Garthcoed, from the perspective of the people who live there, has its own clearly identifiable (physical and symbolic) spaces and boundaries, as well as borderlands where spaces are less clearly seen as owned, marked or occupied. Due to the nature of the research collaboration the research took place across Garthcoed but, particularly from an insider perspective, not all places suffered from the same blemish as others. These nuances of place played out in our research.

## Place based stigma

In writing about stigmatised places Loïc Wacquant (2007) draws on Goffman's (1963) seminal work on stigma to argue that ideas of disgust and vilification are applied to areas which have suffered the most economically to create a 'blemish of place' (p. 67). 'Territorial stigma' is not a characteristic of neighbourhoods themselves but a form of advanced marginality associated with modern capitalism. Others have argued that the construction of some places as 'bad' has a key role in justifying associations between income, responsible living and health inequalities (Keene & Padilla 2014, Popay et al., 2003), and the imposition of conditions limiting access to welfare, and other social benefits (Etherington & Daguerre, 2015).

Media of various kinds can play an important role supporting and reinforcing representations of places as 'other' and amplifying their reputations as dangerous, pathetic or disgusting. In particular, social housing estates have been depicted in popular television programmes as run down and dangerous, and the people living in them as morally defunct, as in the fictional television series 'Shameless' in the UK and 'Housos' in Australia. In addition documentaries which claim to give an insight into the lives of people living on welfare in particular estates in the UK serve to harden attitudes to people living in economically disadvantaged places (Mooney, 2011). Previous research has found that:

"The media has played an active role in supporting and embellishing pathological depictions of social housing estates as sites of disorder and crime, drawing on explanations that cite individual agency and behaviour as the problems." (Arthurson, 2012, p. 101)

Whether or not these depictions are 'accurate' in any way seems to have little regard for the damage that can be caused to the people living in such communities, and their health and mental wellbeing (Kelaher, Warr, Feldman & Tacticos, 2010).

A form of 'cultural silence' can be produced when participants internalise the discourses of shame and disgust that are perpetuated through the media, and view themselves and their peers through the same lens (Keene & Padilla, 2014); what Imogen Tyler calls a 'disgust consensus' (2013). Tyler draws on Mary Douglas' explanation of disgust as the expression of a shared consensus on what constitutes "polluting objects, practices or

persons” (Tyler, 2013, p. 23). That is, there is no ‘natural dirt.’ Dirt is socially constructed according to the norms and values of a particular social and cultural context. Through the persistence of laughable and lamentable images of people performing poverty in ways that appear ‘shameless’ the idea that the poor are morally culpable becomes, in the absence of alternative representations, difficult to resist. Popay et al. show how blaming other groups of people for ‘improper places’ is one way in which people can create a positive identity in the context of ‘ontological uncertainty generated by their daily experience of places’ (Popay et al., 2003, p. 65). They may reject the ways in which their lives are portrayed, and certainly the people we spoke to were extremely hostile to such representations, but one way to manage such assaults is through a form of ontological distancing.

This paper is concerned with the ethical dimensions of doing representational research in a context where there is deep territorial stigma. There is a tension between conducting research where any kind of ‘poverty talk’ risks reinforcing the stigma that researchers often seek to avoid (Warr, 2005) and avoiding making visible the deeply injurious effects of economic inequality. Considering themes of representation, audience and authorship, we argue that although participatory arts practice can be a tool for challenging stigma, it involves a number of ethical dilemmas.

### Arts based methods: salvation from ‘ineffable’ meanings?

The methodological approach to this work is informed by the epistemologies of community-based participatory research (CBPR) and arts-based research which themselves have stemmed from a growing dissatisfaction and uneasiness in the social sciences about the often extractive nature of social research (Allen, Mohatt, Markstrom, Byers & Novins, 2012; Petrucka, Bassendowski, Bickford & Goodfeather, 2012). Arts-based research uses artistic processes (such as storytelling, visual arts, poetry, film making or dance) as forms of social inquiry which “extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 1). Hence these creative forms of inquiry seriously challenge assumptions about the nature of knowledge and research and have broadened the inductive nature of qualitative inquiry to embrace the fluidity, spontaneity and element of ‘the unknown’ which is so central to artistic inquiry (Leavy, 2015). This potential was discussed by Guillemin and Westall (2008) who used drawing as a method for study involving women who had experienced post-natal depression. Some women were unable to talk about their experiences of post-natal depression even as they were able to speak articulately about their recovery. This was attributed to the raw emotions of the illness being too difficult to express verbally. Their drawings, however, offered insights into their experiences of post-natal depression and to express feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that would not otherwise have been available (Guillemin & Westall, 2008).

Arts-based approaches have been used particularly within CBPR frameworks in the advancement of social justice and activist agendas (Freire, 2000; Duffy, 2010; Conrad, 2015). Claimed to be based on mutuality, shared ownership of knowledge, co-learning, empowerment and an equitable process, CBPR provides a context within which arts-

based methods can be utilised. An example of this is the Youth Uncensored Project in Edmonton, Canada (Conrad, 2015) that involved a group of ‘street-involved’ young people, who were largely excluded from mainstream education. The project repositioned the young people who used a range of arts-based methods to represent and discuss experiences such as addiction, the law, family dynamics, access to healthcare and racism. The young people performed a range of creative outputs including scenarios depicting negative encounters with service providers through the style of forum theatre or ‘theatre of the oppressed’ (Boal, 2000). These were performed to an audience of key stakeholders and social service providers. The audience members were invited to identify points of tension in the performances, and to come on stage to act out possible alternative interactions. At the end a face-to-face dialogue between the young people and service providers took place (Conrad, 2015).

The role of the arts in this example was three-fold: to serve as a means of reflection and expression for the young people; to facilitate dialogue with the service providers; and to alter service providers’ perceptions of this particular group. Service providers reported a change in their attitudes and perceptions towards this group of young people, and felt that the dramatized scenarios enabled the young people to portray their lived experiences effectively. The positive outcomes of the study were seen as demonstrating the value of arts-based research in the context of CBPR in providing ethically safe spaces for dialogue and for foregrounding participants’ voices in a way that impacts on audience members’ knowledge and understanding. Hence by moving beyond the boundaries of typical qualitative research methods into the realms of the aesthetic and towards an affective and ‘viscerally felt sensorial experience’ (Chilton & Leavy, 2014), arts-based research marks a paradigmatic shift in how we come to understand and talk about social ‘realities’ (Leavy, 2015).

Despite the claim that this type of research addresses power inequalities in traditional research, more recent attention has been paid to the ethical challenges inherent in participatory research, with a particular focus on the ethical issues of data ownership, analysis and participant anonymity (Fraser & al Sayer, 2011). Arts based participatory research highlights and intensifies ethical issues of representation and the related issues of audience and authorship. Whilst there is a lack of research literature in this area these issues are becoming more visible through practice sharing events and workshops (Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, Allemang, & Stasiulis, 2014). In the field of childhood studies, these discussions are more developed. The methodological and ethical challenges of representing young peoples’ lives, particularly in stigmatised areas, have been discussed in relation to participatory film and visual methods (Lomax, Fink, Singh & High, 2011; Holland, Renold, Ross & Hillman, 2010).

In places where the ‘blemish of place’ is felt through discourses of poverty and representation, we contend that the use of arts-based methods can enable residents to ‘speak back’ to prevailing representational forms such as statistical area profiles and rankings and negative media items. However, this co-productive process can be highly contested and ‘messy’ in projects with multiple participant groups, stakeholders and research aims. There is a tendency to minimise talk about mess in research, due to what

Law (2004) argues is an obsession with clarity and the definite in research discourse. This shapes what we come to think of as 'good' research (Law, 2004). But failure to talk about mess results in an incomplete and less honest picture of what happens in this type of research, which may lead other researchers to feel inadequate when they encounter it in their own work (Cook, 2009).

We discuss how this mess is particularly evident at certain points during the research process, where different representational logics are held in tension, and give rise to ethical challenges pertaining to representation, audience and authorship. In the project discussed here, all the case studies experimented with different forms of creative engagement and representation with a range of age groups. This paper focuses on two examples of arts-based research with pupils at local primary and secondary schools in Garthcoed. Whilst we could have described examples with other groups these best highlight some of the ethical dilemmas that arts-based participatory research raises.

## Ethical reflections on co-creating visual representations

### *Safeguarding reputations through representation*

In this section we focus on the visual data and outputs created through arts based research with a primary school in Garthcoed. Research activities with the Year 5/6 class (ages 9-11) were held weekly during school time between October 2014 and June 2015, culminating in a trip to a recording studio in an arts centre in Merthyr town centre to record a music video for a song written by the class. The research explored children's perceptions of the local community through a series of arts workshops including film, drawing, poetry and song, working alongside professional artists and the class teacher. Data were generated through arts practices, discussions with participants, and as diverse creative outputs including 46 drawings, 26 poems, one song and music video, and 24 pieces of film recorded by pupils.

The class was encouraged to talk about the aspects of their community that they did not like or wanted to change, as well as identifying what they saw as its assets. Pupils responded to this with ease and enthusiasm, producing footage that articulated both the negative and positive aspects of local life.

When describing the research, it was clear early on that the research rationale itself, and the way in which we as researchers might be seen as characterising the area, could provoke profound feelings of discomfort. One instance where this became evident was through an incidental discussion with a member of staff:

I sat with Mrs Lloyd [pseudonym] and she asked me "So who do you work for?" The question took me by surprise and I realised that I hadn't had much opportunity to talk with her on her own since starting the workshops. My initial engagement with the school had been through another member of staff so Mrs Lloyd and I had not had an in-depth discussion about the research. I told her about the research aims and described the other case studies. Although I had explained at the start of my involvement with the

school that the project was a case study, I hadn't gone into detail about the other communities. This was, therefore, the first time she fully understood what we were doing. Her reaction when I stopped talking made me slightly uncomfortable, she said: "Ahh, so we're one of 'those' communities, that's how you see us". I got the sense Mrs Lloyd felt a bit dismayed at the thought of her community being seen in a similar light to the other case study areas.

(Field notes)

This encounter demonstrates how the research, because it focused on the sensitive topics of representation and stigma, was seen as itself shaping public representations of place. Mrs Lloyd appeared thoroughly supportive of our involvement with the school and the arts-based workshops and had been a lively contributor to the discussions the pupils had about deprivation and stigmatisation, but when hearing about the academic rationale for the study she bristled in the realisation that her community had been chosen to be part of the project about stigmatised and deprived places.

It was important to emphasise that we did not see the school and its community as just a 'case' study (about invisible, troubled or stigmatised places) but as a place that has been caught up in representations. These representations tell partial, and often damaging, insights into the everyday lives of people in complex communities that make up the 'bigger' places (towns, clusters, super-output areas) that policy makers and other publics see. In fact the school is not located in the micro-locality most commonly identified as 'problematic' in media, policy and even localised discourses. The school staff will have known this. The unsaid association, not with Merthyr itself which was seen as having a misunderstood but proud history, but with specific locations in Garthcoed, and alongside other 'cases' in the research that were viewed negatively could be seen as imposing stigma by association. In Mrs Lloyd's eyes we had positioned ourselves as judgemental outsiders gazing at their tarnished community. This further highlighted to us the need for a reflexive and egalitarian approach to our research.

### *Institutional and aesthetic logics: where audience disciplines authorship*

In the weekly workshops with pupils, we found that ethical challenges arose in terms of the authorship of these artistic outputs in a way that was closely tied to the anticipated audience. This prompted us to consider how the priorities of the research, the school, the participants and the artist were compromised as a result of conducting this type of arts-based co-productive research. For the stories and drawings that the pupils created, the audience was internal; nothing was being made for audiences outside of the classroom or outside of the research, and their class-teacher was either absent or took the role of interested observer rather than contributor. However, tensions between different institutional and aesthetic logics arose following the decision to use poetry to create the lyrics for a collectively written song about their area which would also be filmed. One teacher now became fully involved in these workshops, and strongly voiced what should and should not be said. We could feel the voice of the children diminish as the focus switched towards writing poems which only contained positive reflections of their town, encouraging pupils not to include the more nuanced reflections containing negative associations such as the bad weather, late buses or fighting. Instead of pupils producing arts-based data about what they wanted to express, they were guided by the teacher and in this way the value of the poems

as data was weakened. Imagined future audiences influenced the process with effects of silencing anything that could add to the barrage of negative images that were already associated with their town.

Authorship was challenged in other ways. Having written individual poems, the class worked with a musician to compile these into one collaboratively written song. We noted tensions between the logic of the research (systematically exploring children's' perceptions of wellbeing and place) and that of artistic expression (creating something artistically strong). At the beginning of this process the musician took the researcher aside and said "We can't do this in a completely democratic way, it's impossible. We need to pick out the bits in each poem that will go into the song." During the break, we went through each poem, highlighting lines and phrases that worked with the aesthetic logic of the song, as well as making sure that something was included from each poem. These were typed up and put on the interactive white board for the class to review. The teacher was absent from the session when the class and musician worked the excerpts from the poems into verses, a bridge and a chorus. This process involved cutting out, adding and changing some words and sentences to fit with the rhythm of the song, and was led by the musician rather than by participants or the researcher. This again raised questions of authorship and whose voice would be heard in the final product. Field notes recorded how the children's voices (and therefore the research data) were being shaped by wider aesthetic and institutional logics:

During the song writing Mike (the musician) is resisting being led by the children. They have some really great ideas but it's difficult to hear them and incorporate them. Mike is trying to work quickly as we're under time pressure, and I can see him thinking of how to construct the lyrics in his own head. I interrupt when I hear the children making suggestions that are either not heard or overlooked. I'm not sure Mike is used to working in this way. It makes me wonder about the balance of input when something is co-produced; whose voice will really be heard in the final output?

(Field notes)

In the next session, the lyrics were reviewed, and the music track was identified. With the teacher back in the class, other tensions arose:

There are tensions between the teacher and the class when it comes to the lyrics they have written with Mike. There is one line about jaywalkers which she says she doesn't like and looks over to me and says "Miss, can we change that? I really don't like it." I ask the class: "What do you think of this lyric, do you want to change it?" We do a vote and the majority want to keep it, but the teacher is insistent. "This is supposed to be a song to tell the world about our community, I don't want to talk about jaywalkers walking across the road!" She and another teacher suggest an alternative line, which is written in to the song instead. I can pick up on Mike's frustration at this point; he likes the jaywalker lyric (he suggested it).

(Field notes)

It was planned to make a music video of the children singing their song and the issue at stake was again one of audience: who was going to see and judge the merits of the video? For the teacher this was the primary consideration, hence the statement "This is supposed to be a song to tell the world about our community, I don't want to talk about jaywalkers crossing the road!" At this point, a struggle emerged between the research, the participants, the artist and the teacher. We were all thinking about audience but had different understandings as to how these invisible viewers and listeners would judge, respond or engage with the song. As researchers we wanted the artistic output to be reflective of the data rather than being re-written by the teacher or the artist, but this concern was shared by neither the teacher nor the artist; they were both concerned with how the song would be received by a public audience in terms of their own positions as guardian of childhood and as artist. Notably, the reference to jaywalkers in the lyrics did not even derive from the data; it was added in by the artist to complete the verse.

#### *Authorship through aesthetic praxis*

As well as working with the primary school, the research involved a group of Year 10 pupils (age 14-15) at a local high school on a participatory photography project. Derived from Freire's notion of praxis in his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Photovoice is a method which has been widely implemented as a visual method (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 1999). Photovoice usually begins with an issue or question that participants identify as important to them, but in this case a more gentle exploration of young peoples' lives in a particular locality was the aim. We therefore developed an adapted format to allow participants to retain more flexibility. We devised an approach which involved the deliberate co-facilitation of each session between the researcher and a photographer. The photographer's role was to train the young people in the use of photographic techniques and to facilitate discussion on the aesthetic aspects of their images. This school is located in a micro-area that is strongly associated with negative imagery in the media. Young people in the school had also been involved in another research project (involving one of the authors of this paper) which mapped young people's perceptions of safety, danger and wellbeing and a clear concern with how the area was discredited in the media was highlighted<sup>2</sup>. This may partly explain why the young people in the photography group embraced the opportunity (outside of school hours) to develop creative ways of resisting negative representations. Through participatory photography, we found that young people were able to find ways of talking about their community through the language and grammar of aesthetics. By this we mean that the young people could use the non-textual language given to them by the photographer, i.e. photographic theory and compositional techniques such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, light and dark, perspective and shadow. In this context, 'language' and 'grammar' refer to these forms of aesthetic composition and communication. These provided ways of speaking back to media tropes of failure and deficit and in so doing challenge externally imposed negative images with ones that they own as individuals and collectively.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of images were taken by the young people on their smartphones and uploaded to Flickr to be discussed each week. The project ended with a public exhibition



of photographs and other outputs from the research that was attended by members of the local community, service providers, policy representatives, community development workers, researchers and artists. A short film of the process<sup>4</sup> explains how, through the expertise of the professional photographer, the language and grammar of aesthetics was used to enable participants to give meaning to the images they had taken beyond their own descriptions. This allowed them to become authors of alternative visual narratives through which their lives and their community could be represented, without minimising negative constructions for fear of further territorial stigma. We found that through aesthetics participants could visually represent facets of their identity that could not be talked about, for example the masculine experience of loneliness and isolation; depicted in images but unable to be expressed through words. Furthermore, being able to think and talk about aesthetics changed how participants interacted and experienced their environment; we heard how the project had enabled them to see things differently by making 'the familiar strange' (Mannay, 2010).

In terms of authorship, it was evident that the representational logics of the research, the institution and aesthetics were able to co-exist more comfortably than in the primary school. As researchers we felt less tension between our positionality and that of the participants, the school and the artist. Giving up control over the process was easier for a number of factors. First, there was increased harmony between the perspectives of participants. The teacher encouraged the group to become aware of what they wanted to change about their community and the students were not constrained by the representational logic of childhood innocence which seemed to pervade much of our work in the primary school. Therefore, a safe space to explore some of the negative aspects of the community was created and legitimised by the teacher. Second, the artists in each context were faced with different tasks. In the primary school, the musician had a short amount of time to work with the pupils to create their song, and to integrate their poems into one composition. In the secondary school, the photographer shaped and guided the pupils' work, but did not have the same challenge of creating a coherent piece of work from varied contributions. There was therefore greater scope for individual contributions to the exhibition and although this was curated by the photographer, the pupils were able to decide themes that informed the exhibition.

However, we found that whilst the Photovoice method was successful in mitigating some of the tensions and ethical challenges we encountered in other areas of the research, there were still certain topics that could not be visually represented. Discussions in the workshops sometimes included participants' experiences of violence, intimidation and drug dealing in the neighbourhood, and although we discussed how this could be represented through metaphor in an image, the group decided not to include this in their photography. It is possible that the intensity of these themes, through the setting of a school and where the common ground for participants' experiences of these difficult and often very personal issues is uncertain, made Photovoice in this particular context inappropriate. We did not explore the motives for not including these themes in the photographs, but it suggests that there are limits to the scope of visual methods in articulating sensitive topics. However there is clearly more work needed to be done on how, why, where and if visual and other arts based methods might be used to better

understand and support people experiencing deeply personal, damaging issues that impact on their health and everyday wellbeing.

## Discussion

The narrative above gives some idea of the messiness that is often associated with such research, particularly as arts based research processes are emergent rather than having a clear structure and set of practices. These dilemmas were deepened through the exploration and creation of representations in places with reputational geographies (Parker & Karner, 2010). These emerged in three particular but interrelated ways: representational practices, authorship and audience. First, the very act of generating representations drew attention to place in ways that make visible, drew attention to, or even generated, a potential sense of lack, deficit or/and hurt that could be seen as stigmatising. The very notion of counter-representation could both make the stigma visible and at the same time silence any talk of the real problems that community members face in everyday life. Whilst there was clearly a need to make visible the positive aspects of everyday life that are often ignored by media, policy and practice (as well as being important for wellbeing) there is also a need to find ways of understanding the problems many communities face in ways which are nonetheless authored by the people who experience them. Second, in participatory arts based research there is a real question of ownership and who authors the process (of collecting data, creative activity, pedagogy) and the product itself. Authorship demands certain rules of integrity (the aesthetic grammars of different kinds of arts practice) and bestows status and pride. As far as the authoring role of us as researchers was concerned we saw ourselves as co-constructors of data in much the same way that any qualitative interview is a co-construction. However the use of arts was chosen, in part, as a way of generating new knowledge and insights that were alternative to the authoritative voice of the research report or paper. Whereas this paper has been written by researchers and not with the involvement of participants or our project partners, we are working on other outputs such as blogs, booklets and photo-books which will be co-produced. This paper provides an important opportunity to reflect on such processes. Ongoing work on the processes of co-production within this project may, however, reveal more complicated authoring dynamics. Finally, arts based research processes revealed ethical dilemmas associated with audience as an unseen but powerfully felt presence. This was both in terms of a concern to produce outputs that were aesthetically strong (safeguarding artistic reputations) but also a concern to safeguard the reputations of the people and institutions that constituted place.

In the re-construction of cultural representations there are ethical challenges pertaining to how places come to be represented, by whom, and to whom; whose voices are heard and whose are diminished at various points during the process and in the final product? Furthermore, linked to this, when co-producing artistic outputs based on research data, what is to be privileged – the process or the art?

Allowing participants to create their own representations from their own perspectives was our primary goal and so their voices were intentionally prioritised. Ethically, enabling

participants to retain as much ownership and power over the process as possible would result in a product they were proud of and felt was theirs; even if the artistic quality of the output was compromised. In the Photovoice project this was achieved as participants created visual representations with minimal intervention from the other actors in the process. The photographs were voice, data, and art so there was very little translation to do in the co-production of cultural representations. The photographer was there to guide, teach and coach the young people in their photography and editing, so the focus was always on the process rather than an end result. In the case of Merthyr's Big Heart, the role of the artist was different; he was given the task of working participatively to co-produce a song from poems written by participants. There was a clear end result that everybody was working towards, which would have a public audience. Keeping the song as close as possible to the participants' own words would, from the research perspective, ensure that authorship remained firmly with them, rather than with the artist. What we had not anticipated was that the voice of the teacher would be so strong, influencing participants' poetry and literally re-wording the lyrics of the song. With this in mind, researchers need to understand, respect, engage and work within regulatory constraints which may serve to safeguard children who are exposed to the positive and negative responses of audiences both now and into the future.

The issue of audience was central and is the reason why, ethically, the researchers could not insist on maintaining the integrity of the song as being composed entirely by the pupils. To do so would have broken the trust we had built between researchers and the school, and would have resulted in an end product that the school would not have been happy with. Hence in addition to the institutional regulations that shape practices (e.g. university research ethics regulations and school regulations regarding safeguarding and conduct), there were also the institutional practices that maintain reputations. Whilst the school teachers wanted the pupils to 'do the school proud' they were also aware of their role in safeguarding the reputation of place. In addition, their role as providers of education, and thereby, literally performing their pedagogic role was also at play. Similarly the artists' concern to preserve their own reputations as creative artists was sometimes also at odds with the need to respond to the wishes of participants. Where these dynamics worked well was when there was a sharing of skills and knowledge in those moments when institutional logics were not in conflict. Understanding how and when these operate are crucial in participatory arts based approaches to research as they are inherent in shaping both the process and what is created. Co-production should therefore be understood as a critical process that enables the representational logics (lay, institutional, aesthetic and research) to surface these tensions and enable them to be unpacked as the project unfolds. Although they may not be fully resolved they are at least recognised and reflected on in ways that are explicit to those involved.

The presence of authorship and audience in representations also presents very obvious ethical issues around anonymity. These representations were meant to be public otherwise they could not be counter representations which spoke back to official discourses of place. Discussions about the dimensions of anonymity in talking about place, particularly those aspects of living in particular places relevant to more private experiences that impact on health and wellbeing, need to be discussed. Therefore

researchers have a particular responsibility with regard to how sensitive issues of, for instance, violence and mental distress, are handled in the research process. As researchers we were careful not to both further pathologise places in the ways in which we explored sensitive issues particularly prevalent in interview data with working age adults, but also not to hide issues (such as the impact of welfare sanctions on mental health) which older respondents, not discussed in this paper, articulated. These have become the material of a social praxis which fall outside the domain of representation and are more clearly part of a desire to re-imagine organisational structures.

## Conclusion

Many actors were involved in what are co-constructions with diverse institutional logics shaping the ways in which representations were authored. These were also informed by the inherent public nature of these representations and the fact that an imagined audiences is always present. Whilst the visual representations were an attempt to identify the 'shared meanings' that capture the tones of everyday life not evident in official or dominant representations, the more negative shades of living in poverty and its implications for health and wellbeing were often hidden and only articulated, to a certain extent, in the process of talking about representations rather than as part of the final creative products. For people living in this particular part of Merthyr the key point was to challenge mainstream, outsider representations. The point was to show the beauty and the social relatedness of place as well as the resourcefulness of residents.

The territorial stigma imbued in places such as Garthcoed makes it difficult for people to feel powerful, as place-identity is constructed in the context of a disgust consensus perpetuated through media and official discourse. For the young people involved in Merthyr's Big Heart and the Photovoice research projects (as well as other arts based research activities with other age groups in the area) the creative arts afforded them the possibility of co-constructing representations of place in which their perspectives were privileged and their voices heard. This highlights the potential power and transformational possibilities that arts practices possess when used in places where territorial stigma runs deep. Rather than passively consuming representations whilst facing a 'dictatorship of no alternatives' (Unger, 2009, p1), it is possible for community members to use their own intelligence and knowledge to re-construct how they are represented. However, what we hope this paper has shown is that this process is complex, and that the privileging of participants' perspectives can raise ethical dilemmas which are difficult to resolve. At the same time it is important for researchers to step back and recognise that what is being produced is more than simply a product of research and to respect what can and what cannot be made visible in the context of how visual representations are authored and interpreted by others.

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### Endnotes

1 See [www.representingcommunities.co.uk](http://www.representingcommunities.co.uk) for more details.

2 <http://www.productivemargins.ac.uk/projects/heads-of-the-valley-v2/>

3 see [www.representingcommunities.co.uk](http://www.representingcommunities.co.uk) for more details and gallery.

4 [www.representingcommunities.co.uk](http://www.representingcommunities.co.uk)